

Providing Essential Services in the Wake of a Global Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2020, Sonoma County Human Services staff was charged with devising and implementing an immediate plan to provide essential safety-net services to the public due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This case study examines San Francisco County's hybrid work schedule that allows for mobile, remote telework, and home office work and

draws implications for Sonoma County. Sonoma County could consider continuing to offer aspects of this type of new work schedule which might not only help Sonoma County strengthen its workforce through increased employee retention, but could also aid the county's community of employees in finding a more manageable work-life balance.

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Introduction

In prior years, BASSC Executive Development Program (EDP) participants from across the Bay Area would attend three week-long modules over a nine-month period of in-person classes starting in October, submit a half-day exchange paper, complete a Spring project case study, and graduate in May. This year's cohort, however, the 27th class coming through this program, faced unique obstacles this year that resulted in class cancellations, barriers to completing planned Spring projects, classes completed via Zoom, and a virtual graduation in August 2020.

Many of the original topics offered to participants for their Spring projects were no longer feasible for all participants, including myself, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and each county's subsequent need to plan and coordinate the delivery of essential safety-net services while adhering to a mandated Shelter-in-Place (SIP) Health Order.

My own half-day project was coincidentally about a hybrid work schedule in San Francisco County that allows for mobile, remote, and home office work. Sonoma County Human Services was forced to implement similar schedules in response to the pandemic.

Context: The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can cause illness in animals or humans. In human beings, there are several known coronaviruses that cause respiratory infections. COVID-19 was identified in

Wuhan, China in December 2019. COVID-19 and is caused by the virus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), a new virus in humans causing respiratory illness which can be spread from person to person. This virus is primarily transmitted from person to person contact through respiratory droplets. These droplets are released when someone with COVID-19 sneezes, coughs, or talks.

Shelter-in-Place Health Order

Sonoma County's Health Officer issued a mandatory Shelter-in-Place (SIP) Health Order on March, 17, 2020. The intent of the order is to ensure that the maximum number of people self-isolate in their places of residence to the maximum extent feasible while enabling essential services to continue. Ideally, this procedure would slow the spread of COVID-19 to the maximum possible extent. The order affected roughly 494,336 individuals in Sonoma County. Indoor operation of office work spaces where telework was not possible could only operate if considered part of the essential critical infrastructure.

San Francisco County's Hybrid Work Program

In 2016, San Francisco Human Services (SFHS) partnered with the Department of Disability and Adult Services (DAAS) to provide a One-Stop Hub, an in-person service center focused on older people, adults with disabilities, caregivers, and veterans. Services/resources available at the Hub include:

- County Veterans Service Office
- DAAS Eligibility (Medi-Cal, CalFresh)

- Information and Referral
- In Home Supportive Services (IHSS) Provider Support
- Computer Lab
- Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program (HICAP)

The Medi-Cal and CalFresh eligibility staff comprises four units that are specifically focused on DAAS clientele, working closely with IHSS to help clients remain in their homes rather than in skilled nursing or long-term care facilities. This team administers home visits utilizing mobile workstations for service users in need of extra assistance getting their needs met.

Although San Francisco County has had success with this model, SFHS has been continuously challenged in several areas, including office space availability, premium cost for office space, parking, employee retention, and commuter costs for employees. Due to these challenges, SFHS created an additional option for eligibility workers at the Hub that would allow for a combination of office work, mobile field work and telecommuting from home Monday to Friday from 8am–5pm. In March of 2018, SFHS launched Phase 1 for nine eligibility workers within the Mobile Work/Telecommute Hybrid (MTH) Pilot. Phase 3 was later completed by January of 2019 for a total of seventeen eligibility workers.

The option to offer and implement mobile work/telecommuting has many positives, but is not without its downsides. Some advantages included environmental benefits, space and office rent savings, shared parking, increased productivity, effective use of staff, increased flexibility, reduced absenteeism, reduced employee commute times and costs, increased employee satisfaction, and increased ability to continue functionality when access to worksite is impeded. Challenges included coverage concerns, equity, reduced face-to-face time with coworkers, reduced face-to-face support from supervisors, increased isolation, shared work space while working in office, and increased initial time required to

set up policies, procedures, and equipment/access in each home.

Staff Input

During my visit to the SFHS DAAS Hub, I had the opportunity to meet with management, supervisory staff, and several employees who currently or previously worked in the MTH Program. These staff were able to share some of the growing pains of MTH implementation that included home computer and network set-up issues, difficulties supervising over network or phone, increased loneliness, and difficulty separating home duties from work while at home. The workers shared that some of the highlights of being able to work the MTH schedule have included saving money and time on commuting (on average an employee could save nearly \$2,500 per year and over 4,000 miles commuting), being able to cook fresh food for lunch, taking less vacation/sick time for appointments due to working close to home, experiencing less stress and anxiety than driving into the city, having the flexibility to see clients from their homes, and still having the opportunity to work in the office.

Benefits for San Francisco County

Office space and parking comes at a premium in San Francisco. Based on the challenges of working in San Francisco and the fact that SFHS employees predominately commute into the city, the MTH hybrid work schedule (60% at home, 5% in the field and 35% in the office) not only eases space and parking deficiencies, but also augments employee satisfaction and retention by allowing schedule flexibility and cost savings.

Implementing an Essential Service Plan for Sonoma County During a Pandemic

In March 2020, leadership charged Sonoma County Human Services staff with devising and implementing an immediate plan to provide essential safety-net services to the public due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This task would require a different

FIGURE 1
Considerations for Providing Safety-Net Services During the Shelter-in-Place Order

Work in the Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who will work in the office? ▪ How will we ensure proper social distancing and safety for employees? ▪ What is the safety protocol for allowing employees and customers into the office? ▪ What services should we offer in the office?
Telework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who can/should work remotely? ▪ What equipment is needed to achieve this? ▪ What are the network/internet requirements? ▪ Are there ergonomic concerns? ▪ How will we issue benefits or conduct business with clients? ▪ What if there are power outages that don't allow for the remote work? ▪ How will we supervise, collaborate, monitor and measure work of remote employees? ▪ How do we ensure equity of work and expectations within the workforce?
Field Work and Emergency Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ When is it necessary to be out in the community? ▪ Do we have the necessary safety equipment to keep people safe? ▪ Are there ways to do field work virtually?
Distance Learning and Child Care Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How can parents that have lost child care or need to homeschool their children work at the same capacity that was expected prior to COVID-19?

way of conducting business. With the Shelter-in-Place (SIP) Health Order in effect, community businesses were shut down, people were losing jobs, and students, parents, and teachers were forced into homeschool by way of distance learning.

Work in the Office

Sonoma County was given word that the SIP order would be put in place on March 17, 2020, which at least allowed for some pre-planning. Due to several disasters in recent years, the planning for service delivery did not require much effort, but determining who and how many people should be in the office while maintaining safety protocols required a bit more thought. Immediate considerations prior to limiting office hours included:

- Who is considered high risk for COVID-19 complications based on CDC guidance?
- Are there employees that need to be home to care for or home school a child?

- Can we identify the skeleton crew needed in the front and back of office to assist the public with their needs?
- Are the cubicles and walls distanced enough to meet the requirements and keep people safe?
- What personal protective equipment and sanitation supplies are needed?

Early Implementation of a Telework Model

Employees not in the office would be working remotely from home. For some county divisions, this practice was already common practice, but how would this be achieved for those divisions that have never had this option as part of their business practice? The county was able to anticipate some needs, but the details of telework continue to be adjusted, as there are now more employees working remotely than in the office. Some plans on how to proceed included the following:

- Poll employees to determine what equipment—county or personal—they have that would allow them to work remotely (cell phones, wi-fi, computers, monitors, secure office space, printers, etc.).
- Prioritize employees lacking equipment to receive county issued devices as they became available.
- Request employees use their own personal computers and phones until equipment can be ordered and distributed.
- Request all employees utilize their home wi-fi to manage business from home.
- Collect telework and home device agreements.
- Secure county network access and bandwidth use.

Field Work, In-Person Appointments, Participation, and Telephonic Signatures

Home visiting, in-office appointments, and regular field work have been put on hold during the pandemic unless absolutely necessary to conduct business. The onset of COVID-19 set the pace for lawmakers to change policy that would allow flexibility in how county employees conduct interviews and collect necessary paperwork/signatures from service users, as well as in expectations for client participation. Self-certifications, Zoom/phone interviews, and verbal authorizations are just a few examples of adaptation to the SIP order. In the event an employee is required to go out in the field or to have an in-person meeting with a customer, safety precautions are taken by way of personal protective equipment, sanitizing cleaners, and maintaining proper social distancing.

Next Steps

In the early months of the COVID-19 Shelter-in-Place Health Order, no one really knew how long the crisis would last or what the outcomes would be. The county is now six months into the pandemic with no clear end in sight. Flexible work schedules that combine office, remote, and field work are no longer a mystery, but rather a familiar way of conducting

business, due to the emergency implementation and ongoing health crisis.

Lack of Child Care and Distance Learning

The start of Fall, brings another challenge, in that the workforce, and clientele may need to stay home to take care of children and to monitor distance learning. Increased telework, flexible work hours, and options for reduced schedules are now offered to employees who may need them. Creative options and relaxed participation expectations for clients continue to remain in effect.

Monitoring, Equity, Agreements, Ergonomics and Evaluation

Until it is safe to reopen facilities, conducting business and maneuvering through everyday tasks will follow similar routines for all who are still stuck at home. Despite this feeling of stagnation, however, county systems of care can and should continue to be streamlined and improved. Some important questions to consider are as follows:

- **Monitoring and Evaluating Telework:** How will managers monitor the output of an employee's work if they work fully from home or have a flexible work schedule? The county has standard job descriptions with expectations that may need to be revised to incorporate remote and field work expectations. Tools such as Zoom, WebEx and CISCO Jabber enable immediate virtual communications, replacing much of normal face-to-face meeting expectations. Supervisors may need to increase employee conferencing to assist with monitoring and remote needs.
- **Equity:** How do you measure the equity of work amongst employees? Why are some individuals able to work fully from home while other positions are required to put in more in-person office hours? Each job position has specific duties and expectations. Some staff provide services that can be completed remotely, while others require more in-office duties. As with evaluation and monitoring standards, it will be important

to include clear information for employees about in-office and remote expectations.

- **Home Office Ergonomics:** What precautions are taken to ensure a safe work space? Sonoma County has a system that assists employees and supervisors with work space evaluations. Employees that work remotely should complete this assessment and make revisions to their work space as part of their ongoing safety evaluations.
- **Agreements:** Sonoma County asks employees to review, agree and sign agreements for accessing email, telework, confidentiality, personal equipment, etc. It will need to revise or create an agreement form that details work schedules and expectations for work that cannot be completed from home.

Conclusion

Prior to COVID-19, the idea of a county-wide hybrid work schedule like San Francisco County's MTH program seemed unlikely and probably unnecessary. At that time, Sonoma County needs appeared incompatible with large-scale remote work for the following reasons:

- Most Sonoma County Human Services employees live in the county and do not commute.
- The Sonoma County offices have plenty of space, and parking is free.
- Telework and field work were not already common or familiar for most employees.

Through the pandemic, the county was forced to quickly implement a hybrid work schedule that is flexible and allows for a combination of office, remote, and field work as necessary. Although Sonoma County's initial process could be likened to building a plane while flying it, there have appeared to be some promising benefits to the increased use of hybrid work schedules. Sonoma County employees like this type of schedule and have demonstrated

that they are able to maintain essential services while working from home. Many employees have articulated feeling more valued, supported, and trusted. Staff state they like the flexibility of the work options and hours, the ability to complete household tasks that would normally have to wait until evening or weekends, the opportunity to eat healthier, the time to sleep longer, and the capacity to take more care of their home life. Continuing to offer this type of work schedule could not only help Sonoma County strengthen its workforce through increased employee retention, but could also aid the county's community of employees in finding a more manageable work-life balance.

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